



The Prayer Practice Group Guide

WELCOME

Welcome to our SWBC series on the practice of prayer. You may be new to following Jesus and learning to pray for the very first time. Or you may be at a stage in your relationship with Jesus where you desire to not just learn about God, but to *experience* God. Or you may just find prayer boring or tedious, but you have a growing sense that there's more – there's something you've yet to discover.

Whatever your motivation, we're so happy you've chosen to go on this four-week journey with us into a deeper life with God. In the hurry, distraction, and noise of the modern world, few things are more difficult, or more rewarding, than developing a life of prayer.

Prayer is simply the medium through which we communicate and commune with God. The practice of prayer is learning to set aside dedicated time to intentionally be with God, in order to become like him.

Prayer deepens our relationship with God as we grow in intimacy with him, our relationships with our self and each other as we allow God to transform us, and our relationship with the world, as God grows his global heart in ours.

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You can think of these four modes of prayer as *layers* by which we go deeper with God. When you are first learning to pray, there is a bit of a progression from one to the next. But the spiritual journey is not a linear progression, and maturity in prayer still involves using all of these modes.

As you give yourself to Jesus through this prayer practice, please remember: The ultimate aim is not to 'pray more' or 'pray better'; it's what ancient Christians called *union with God*. Richard Foster says, "The primary purpose of prayer is to bring us into such a life of communion with the Father that, by the power of the Spirit, we are increasingly conformed to the image of the Son."

The aim is to live each day more and more aware of and deeply connected to the Father; to be transformed into the likeness of his Son, Jesus; and to be filled with the fullness of his Spirit, to do what he made you to do in the world.

A note about the Group Guide¹

You may have seen the *Prayer Practice Companion Guide*, the full guide for this course that you can use for prayer during the week. While the *Companion Guide* is more for individual use, we have adapted this guide for groups, so that over the next four weeks you can go through some practices together in your neighbourhood community or small group.

¹ This guide has been adapted from *The Prayer Practice: Companion Guide* by Practicing the Way, a group dedicated to helping churches train people to follow the Way of Jesus. For more information, visit www.practicingtheway.org.

WEEK 1: TALKING TO GOD

Week 1: Overview

This week we explore the first stage of prayer: talking to God. When the disciples asked Jesus, "Teach us to pray," in Luke 11, Jesus replied, "This, then, is how you should pray: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name...'" He gave them a pre-made prayer, or what some call a liturgy, to pray to God.

Liturgies can look like praying the Lord's Prayer, singing through the Psalms or using a prayer app on your phone. This way of praying can be incredibly helpful in various seasons of our lives: when we're learning to pray, when we're exhausted or sick, when we're travelling and find it hard to focus, or when we're living with grief and doubt, searching for the right words to talk to God. 'The prayers of the saints,' as some call them, can carry us through.

So we start our four-week journey simply, by praying pre-made prayers to God.

This week's practice will focus on the pragmatics of prayer. One of the single most important tasks of discipleship is starting, sustaining, and fine-tuning a daily prayer rhythm. Your daily prayer can be simple and brief. And as essential as sleeping, eating, and drinking. This is what will keep you praying in the days, months, and years to come.

Ronald Rolheiser writes:

"What clear, simple, and brief rituals provide is precisely prayer that depends upon something beyond our own energy. The rituals carry us, our tiredness, our lack of energy, our inattentiveness, our indifference, and even our occasional distaste. They keep us praying even when we are too tired to muster up our own energy."

Here are a few questions to hold in your mind as we enter this week's prayer practice:

When will I pray?

First thing in the morning? After my work-out? At night? On my lunch break? When the kids are napping? Many people find first thing in the morning to be best, but not always. As a general rule, give God your best time of day, when you are most awake and aware.

Where will I pray?

Most of us find it incredibly helpful to choose a dedicated space for prayer – a room in our home, a corner in our bedroom, a park bench near our house, or a literal prayer closet. This place can become a kind of modern-day altar where you go to open yourself to God. Not because God hears us better at an altar, but because we hear God better!

How should I pray?

What posture is best for me? Sitting on a chair, a couch, or the floor? Kneeling? Standing? Walking? Lying down? Out loud or quiet? Does it help to begin with deep breathing first to still my body and mind? How do I get my body to work with my heart's desire for God, not against it?

How long should I pray?

There's no 'right' answer (to this or any of the other questions), but as a general rule: long enough to become present to God. And that may take a bit longer than you expect. If you have a newborn child or some other circumstances that make 30 minutes too hard, that's fine. Start where you are and take the next step forward in your journey.

Week 1: Prayer Reflection

Discuss the following questions in pairs and then share together as a whole group.

1. What has your experience of prayer been over your life?

2. What does prayer look like for you at this stage in your life?

(Think about time of day, where you like to pray, what posture works for you, any special routines/rituals you might use, and how long you might spend)

3. What challenges do you face when it comes to prayer?

4. What invitation do you sense from God to go deeper in prayer?

Week 1: Practice Exercise – Praying the Lord's Prayer /

Te Karakia o te Atua



Note: You can use the video by Strahan Coleman (follow the QR code) as a guide for this exercise, or if you prefer, you can use the outline below to lead the group in this practice.

This week, to practice talking to God, our prayer exercise is to use the Lord's Prayer as a template for a longer time of prayer by praying through each line. This should take around 15 minutes to pray, but feel free to take it at your own pace, listening to the Spirit's prompting.

To begin, put away your phones or any other distractions, and get into a comfortable, but alert position. Take a few deep, slow breaths. Become aware of your surroundings, the sounds, how your body is feeling today. Open up to God in this present moment.

Then, praying from what you imagine or feel is a deep place within you, pray like this:

Our Father / E tō mātou Matua	Think about the idea of God as your loving Parent, one who has good and kind intentions toward you. If you like, imagine him embracing you, or smiling at you. Picture his face. Make eye contact with him. <i>Spend 1 minute doing this silently as a group.</i>
In heaven / i te rangi	Think about the idea that God is all around you. He surrounds and soaks your body, his Spirit abiding within you like oxygen. As you breathe, imagine that each breath invites God deeper into you, remembering that God loves living here, in you. <i>Spend 1 minute doing this silently as a group.</i>
Hallowed be your name / Kia tapu tou ingoa	Sit with your Father in joyful, grateful worship. Think of him as holy and sacred. You might want to sit in silence for a few moments. Or sing a chorus. Or speak out a list of things you're grateful for. Or praise God with specific things you love about him. You may want to imagine your whole being caught up into his, and what it feels like to be mingled with the God of love. <i>In your group, encourage people to make their expressions of praise and gratitude out loud, one at a time. (E.g., "Father, thank you for your kindness." "Father, thank you for loving me.")</i>
Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven / Kia tae mai tou rangatiratanga, kia meatia tau e pai ai ki runga ki te whenua, kia rite ano ki to te rangi	As you experience God's heart, allow it to inspire prayer for your church/neighbourhood/suburb/city. Pray from this place of parental love. Picture the street where you live. What would it be like if your street looked a bit more like heaven? Allow the Spirit to lead you towards people, places, and situations that he longs to deliver, heal, and provide for. This type of prayer is referred to as intercession. If you don't have a sense of God's leading, that's okay, pray for specific things you're aware of in your life and for others. <i>In your group, take turns verbally giving to God specific things in your life that you're wrestling with control over. A simple prayer of, "Your will be done in ..." is a great place to start.</i>

Give us each day our daily bread /

Homai ki a mātou aianeī he taro mā mātou mo tēnei ra

Now spend some time asking God for things you need. Remembering that God is your Father, bring to him the provision, healing, and understanding you need, asking him to intervene. Your daily bread may be physical, relational, financial, emotional, or spiritual. Think of all the places you need him, inviting him to arrive there.

In your group you could do this either with each person praying silently, out loud one at a time, or all together at once.

Forgive us our sins, as we have forgiven those who sin against us /

**Murua o mātou hara;
me mātou hoki e muru nei;
i o te hunga e hara ana ki a mātou**

Knowing that God sees you and longs to heal every part of you, spend a few minutes now in quiet, asking God for forgiveness in specific areas of your life. You can do that by speaking out loud the specific areas of sin and shame in your life, or by asking the Spirit to search your heart and reveal them to you.

Once you're done, pray the same for those who have sinned against you, asking the Spirit to help you to continue to forgive them, releasing them to God.

Break into twos or threes to confess sin to each other, only as you feel comfortable, or sit in a few moments of silence together, doing this internally.

And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil /

Aua hoki mātou e kawea kia whakawaia; engari whakaorangia mātou, i te kino

Ask for God's strength and resolve to resist temptation in the three enemies of your soul: the World, the Flesh, and the Devil.

- The World: its ideologies, consumerism and materialism, promiscuity, escapism, addiction, and greed.
- The Flesh: its pride, self-gratification, lust, and prejudice.
- The Devil: his lies, shaming, hatred, violence, and accusing.

Ask for the Spirit to save you from giving into the temptation of all three, and to save you from what you're unable to see in your life. Ask for God's positive blessings in these spaces, inviting his goodness to lead the way and make itself evident in your every moment.

Do this in the same twos or threes you were in for the previous step.

For yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory, forever and ever. Amen /

**Nou hoki te rangatiratanga,
te kaha, me te kororia, ake, ake,
āmine**

Take a moment to verbally declare the reality of this in your own language, attributing all glory to God in yourself (mind and body), your relationships, and the world around you.

Finish with a prayer of thankfulness and gratitude for God's presence with you during this time.

Do this together as a whole group.

WEEK 2: TALKING WITH GOD

Week 2: Prayer Reflection

As you start your time together as a group this week, take 5-10 minutes to discuss the questions below.

As you spent time in prayer over the past week...

1. Where did you feel resistance?
2. Where did you feel delight?
3. Where did you most experience God's nearness?

Week 2: Overview

This week we'll focus on talking with God. Praying pre-made prayers is a beautiful way to pray. It's where we start our prayer journey, and it's a place we revisit all through our lives. But at some point in our life of prayer, we desire to pray our own words to God, to share what's on our mind, our heart – our pain, our joy, our hopes and fears. We can't help but desire to interact with God in a more authentic, personalised way.

We break down this next mode of prayer into three subcategories:

- 1. Gratitude** – Talking with God about what is good in your life and world
- 2. Lament** – Talking with God about what is evil in your life and world
- 3. Petition and Intercession** – Asking God to fulfil his promises to overcome evil with good

Each one of these three ways of talking with God is like a vast territory we can explore for a lifetime and yet never see it all.

This week we are going to focus on Lament.

Week 2: Practice Exercise – Praying your own lament

Note: You can use the video by Strahan Coleman (follow the QR code) as a guide for this exercise, or if you prefer, you can use the outline below to lead the group in this practice.



This exercise can be quite personal. Give people the option of praying out loud if they are comfortable with this or praying silently if not.

Praying lament is a deeply personal experience. This exercise has been designed to help you connect with your own feelings and experiences so you can freely express them to God. Don't feel like you need to go deep if you're not ready. Remember, honesty is where the real power is with lament, so try not to filter your emotions and words.

- 1. Become aware** – To start, make yourself comfortable and take a few deep breaths. Become aware of your surroundings – the sounds, the temperature, how your body is today. Open up to God.
- 2. Focus on a feeling** – Let yourself feel your present emotional state, your difficult situations, your griefs and losses. You may have a few in your life. See if you can bring your focus to one of those emotions, or one of the situations you're currently feeling hurt or angry about.
- 3. Sit with it** – Sit with that feeling without judging it or telling yourself it's good or bad. Just notice how it feels. Can you locate it in your body? Your gut? Chest? Back? Shoulders? What is it like to hold that within you?
- 4. Bring it to God** – Now, imagine holding it out in your hands as you stand before him, so you can both see it. Tell God exactly how you feel, without a filter, and allow God to feel

what you feel in this moment, to acknowledge the pain and grief that exists. Be raw, honest, and vulnerable. Let God hear all that's in your heart. Remember, you're taking your pain to him, on a quest for deeper intimacy, not rebellion. And know that God can bear it, and that he knows what it's like to hurt. Hebrews 4:15 tells us that God sympathises with us. Give God consent to sympathise with your lament.

5. Express your desires and needs – Plead with God to act, to change what is, to redeem or vindicate or heal or save or fight on your behalf. Wrestle with God if you feel the permission to do so.

6. Give God your trust – Then, let go. You might want to say, "Even though I feel [insert your emotion or lament], you are good, and I trust you with it." Or "I trust you, help my lack of trust!" Or use the ending to Jesus' own prayer of lament, "Not my will, but yours be done."

7. Be still – For a few minutes, be still before God and allow him to respond. You may feel a lightness or a peace, you may see a picture or hear a word in your mind or imagination, or you might not. Notice how you feel after letting God hear your lament. Whatever happens, allow God the opportunity to meet you in this moment.

8. Give thanks – Finally, take a moment to thank God for being with you in this space – for listening and for caring.

Week 2: Discussion

1. Spend some time sharing your experiences of this prayer time. If you feel comfortable, you might like to share what you sensed God was saying to you.

2. What different kind/s of prayer would you like to try over the coming week?
(for examples, see the Companion Guide)

Note: You might like to journal your answers to the Week 2 Prayer Reflection questions in the Companion Guide before next week so you can discuss them together.

WEEK 3: LISTENING TO GOD

Week 3: Prayer Reflection

As you start your time together as a group this week, take 5-10 minutes to discuss the questions below.

1. Did you use the prayer of lament during the week?
2. Do you have any stories of answered or *un*-answered prayer?
3. What did you sense God doing in you as you prayed this week?

Week 3: Overview

There comes a point in our relationship with God where we desire not just to speak to him, but to listen. To hear his voice. As Jesus said in John 10:27, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me." This is a Spirit-generated desire in the heart of a disciple of Jesus. In Luke 10:39, it was said of Jesus' disciple Mary that she, "sat at the Lord's feet, listening to what he said." This is the primary posture of a disciple of Jesus: sitting at his feet and listening.

But how do we hear God's voice? He doesn't speak in the ways we're used to, yet he speaks in a variety of ways. Ultimately through Jesus, then Scripture, circumstances, desire, prophecy, dreams, visions, the "still small voice," and more.

Learning to sift through all the "voices" in our head and to discern how God is speaking to us is a key task of discipleship. But learning to hear is just the beginning; learning to obey is the even greater task. Our intention must be to really listen to God, with a heart of loving surrender and trust.

Week 3: Practice Exercise – Praying the Examen

Note: You can use the video by Strahan Coleman (follow the QR code) as a guide for this exercise, or if you prefer, you can use the outline below to lead the group in this practice.



This exercise, the Examen, was developed by St. Ignatius of Loyola as a way of reviewing our day with God. St. Ignatius taught that God often speaks through our emotions, and that, by becoming aware of them, we may also become aware of the Spirit's movements in our own lives. He also encouraged others to talk to Jesus as a friend, sitting with and sharing our lives with him. The Examen was designed as a regular practice for the end of the day or week.

- 1. Become aware of God** – Review the day with the eyes of the Spirit, asking God for the light to see. It may seem rushed to you, a blur or chaotic. If you feel overwhelmed or struggle to focus, ask the Spirit to help you see and bring focus to your mind.
- 2. Look back with gratitude** – As you explore your day, take note of moments where you can thank God for what's been. It may be as simple as noting the provision of food and waking in the comfort of your bed. Think about the people in your day and the connections made. Where was God in each relationship or conversation? Recall the little things about your day, simple everyday pleasures, and discover God among them.
- 3. Notice your emotions** – Reflect on your feelings throughout the day. What do you notice? Without judging what you felt, did you feel anger? Contentment? Empathy? Happiness? Embarrassment? Trusting that God speaks through our emotions, what do you think God was saying amidst them?
- 4. Pray from one piece of your day** – Allowing the Spirit to highlight one element of your day, be it positive or negative, ask him to speak to you about it. Consider it with him and allow it to lead you to prayer, whether it's gratitude, intercession, petition, repentance, or praise.

5. Look ahead to tomorrow – Finally, ask God to prepare your heart for tomorrow. Notice how you feel about it – anxious, excited, nervous, overwhelmed – and invite the Spirit to speak to those joys and concerns. Ask for clarity for the day ahead and for peace to approach it with confidence. Ask for wisdom, for hope, for discernment.

Week 3: Discussion

1. Spend some time sharing your experiences of this prayer time. If you feel comfortable, you might like to share what you sensed God was saying to you.
2. What different kind/s of prayer would you like to try over the coming week?
(for examples, see the Companion Guide)

Note: You might like to journal your answers to the Week 3 Prayer Reflection questions in the Companion Guide before next week so you can discuss them together.

WEEK 4: BEING WITH GOD

Week 4: Prayer Reflection

As you start your time together as a group this week, take 5-10 minutes to discuss the questions below.

1. Did you practice listening to God over the past week?
2. Did you sense God saying anything to you?
3. As you sat with God, did the Spirit convict or comfort you?

Week 4: Overview

The more we pray, the more we desire to speak to God, to listen to God, and to just be with God.

As a general rule, you can gauge the intimacy in a relationship by how comfortable you are being alone together in silence. Early on, relationships are full of words and activity. As you grow closer over time, there are still words and activity, but you also come to deeply enjoy just being with each other.

In the later stages of prayer, all human metaphors fall short, but the most ancient metaphor for this stage is marriage. There is a level of intimacy in marriage that is the intermingling of persons at the deepest level. It is wordless, yet it is a form of communication, and more, communion. Followers of Jesus have long considered this sacred love to be a picture of union with God.

This type of wordless prayer has come to be called 'contemplation,' based on 2 Corinthians 3:18. Its most basic meaning is to contemplate: to look, to gaze upon the beauty of God, receiving his love pouring out toward you in Christ and by the Spirit, and then giving your love back in return.

In our final week's exercises, we explore this way of being with God in love.

Week 4: Practice Exercise – Beholding Prayer

(The Window of the Soul)

Note: *You can use the video by Strahan Coleman (follow the QR code) as a guide for this exercise, or if you prefer, you can use the outline below to lead the group in this practice.*



This exercise — The Window of the Soul — is one way to practice beholding (or contemplative prayer). What's important is that we bring all of ourselves to God and allow him to be present to us with compassion, kindness, and love. Setting our eyes on the God who is, and not the one we may assume or fear. It can take practice to become comfortable with this kind of prayer, so don't worry if you don't fully connect the first time. The most important part is our being lovingly available to God.

1. Become aware – Make yourself comfortable and take a few deep breaths. Become aware of your surroundings – the sounds, the temperature, etc. How does your body feel today? Heavy, light, sore, calm? Reconnecting with ourselves helps bring all of us to God in prayer.

2. Sink into your heart – Try and focus on where you feel the deepest within your body. It may be in your heart, your chest, or your belly. If you're not sure, try to imagine there is an elevator that descends down from your head, through your neck, past your collar bone and into your heart. Place those thoughts in the elevator and send them down into your heart. Don't deny them or try to get rid of them, just allow them to sink into your heart's centre as you pray.

3. Open yourself up to God – While you're in that space, begin to open yourself up to God. If it's helpful, imagine that there are outward opening French doors within you, where your soul feels most present. As you picture them, imagine opening those doors to God and offering him every part of who you are. The good, the not good, the celebrated, and the vulnerable or ashamed. Imagine yourself having no part of you left hidden by choice from God. All is available to be seen.

4. Look to God – As you bring your whole self to him, look toward him. You might imagine Jesus' face, or you may simply look toward his loving presence. In John 15:9, Jesus said, "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you." Allow yourself to see God gazing upon you with love, openness, compassion, and joy. Give him consent to reveal that love toward you personally. Imagine his gaze pouring through the doorway to your soul.

5. Sit with God – Without agenda, allow him to be however he longs to be with you. You may feel or see something beautiful. Even if not, this time is still just as important. Let yourself just be open to God in whatever way today requires, allowing him to be with you. Notice how it feels to be fully seen by God and to be fully open toward him.

6. Return your awareness — As you finish your time together, take a moment to thank God for his love and for being present to you. Then, slowly come back into awareness of the sounds and sensations of the room around you.

Note: For each step, take a minute or two to sit and abide in the process.

Week 4: Discussion

- Spend some time sharing your experiences of this prayer time. If you feel comfortable, you might like to share what you sensed God was saying to you.

- How did you handle distraction while being with God?

- How and where have you sensed God's *with-ness* in your life?

- Reflect together as a group on your experience of this prayer series.

RESOURCES

We recognise that we're all at different places in our stage of discipleship and season of life, so we've added some resources for if you want to go further in prayer.

Reading a book or listening to a podcast alongside this prayer practice can enhance your understanding and enjoyment of prayer. Try out the resources below!

Books

***Beholding: Deepening Our Experience in God* by Strahan Coleman**

Strahan is a musician, writer, retreat leader, and spiritual director from Aotearoa, and a contributor to Practicing the Way. You can find more of his work at commonerscommunion.com.

***Praying Like Monks, Living Like Fools* by Tyler Staton**

This is the recommended companion book for this prayer series. Tyler is the lead pastor of Bridgetown Church in Portland, Oregon, and the national director of 24-7 Prayer USA.

***Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* by Richard Foster**

***Celebration of Discipline* by Richard Foster**

Podcasts

Rule of Life by Practicing the Way

How can I arrange my life to apprentice under Jesus? The Rule of Life podcast is designed to guide you in arranging your everyday life around being with and becoming like Jesus. Each season will cover one of nine ancient Practices from the Way of Jesus: Sabbath, Prayer, Fasting, Solitude, Scripture, Community, Simplicity, Generosity, and Hospitality. Each season is released alongside a Practice – a four-week long experience created by Practicing the Way, designed to integrate these ancient practices into your everyday life.

***Beholding Prayer* by Strahan Coleman**

The Beholding Prayer Podcast is an experiential accompaniment to Strahan's book *Beholding: Deepening Our Experience in God* which explores prayer as seeing and being seen by God in our everyday ordinary lives.

Apps

***Lectio 365* by 24-7 Prayer**

This is a free daily devotional resource that helps you pray the Bible every day. Tune into God's presence and peace by slowing down, meditating on scripture, listening to God and praying for 10 minutes at the beginning and end of each day.

***Centering Prayer* by Contemplative Outreach**

Centering Prayer is a method of silent prayer that prepares us to receive the gift of contemplative prayer, prayer in which we experience God's presence within us. It is an ancient method of Christian prayer adapted for modern times.

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